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WHY ARE SO MANY ABORIGINAL CHILDREN NOT ACHIEVING AT SCHOOL ?

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In 1988 the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force called for broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation, and outcomes at all stages of education. Aboriginals are not achieving a comparative level of success at school compared to non-Aboriginals. Symptomatic of problems in our schools are, the over representation of Aboriginals in lower classes, the high drop-out rate of Aboriginal children and their low participation rates in the senior years of high school. Some 17% of Aboriginal youth continue their schooling to year 12 compared to 49% of all students (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988, p.7). The failure of Aboriginal children to achieve at school has been widely interpreted as an individual failure on the part of Aboriginal children. Poor attainment has been attributed to lower I.Q. and ability, inadequate home environments, and poor parenting and not to the inadequacies of the education provided, to prejudices Aboriginal children face or to the active resistance by Aboriginal people to the cultural destruction implicit in many educational programs (McConnochie, 1982, p.20). An examination of the determinants of school success shows that Aboriginal children's cultural values, beliefs and practices and Australian schools are often in conflict. To improve the outcomes for Aboriginal children schools are required to assess whether or not they are catering for the inherent needs and talents of individual Aboriginal children.

For many years it was believed that Aboriginals had less innate ability or intelligence than non-Aboriginals. A belief in the inferiority of Aboriginals as a race of people had long been supported by, imperialistic rhetoric about white racial supremacy, the failure of Aboriginals to adopt European work ethics, and the numerous failed attempts to educate Aboriginals (Kociumbas, 1988, p.147; McConnochie, 1982, pp.19-22). As late as 1961 the annual

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report of the N.S.W. Aboriginal Welfare Board stated, "...Aboriginal children, as a whole, do not possess an intelligence quotient (I.Q.) comparable to that of their white counterparts..." (Duncan, 1969, p.194). This claim was supported by the poor results Aboriginal students achieved in school administered intelligence tests. I.Q. were then regarded as a major indicator of intelligence.

In a review of the cognitive abilities of Aboriginal children, McElwain (1969), reports on a number of studies that were conducted from 1962 to 1965 that examined the theory of Aboriginals having a lower general cognitive capacity than Europeans. Performances by Aboriginals in standardised tests of intelligence were found to be on average lower than Europeans. In a summation of test results McElwain however argues that there was no incontrovertible evidence at all that Aboriginals possessed a lower cognitive capacity and that there was a strong probability that they were as capable of acquiring complex skills as Europeans. Superior performance by Europeans was interpreted as being a result of the relevance of European-type experience to the solution of intelligence test problems and not due to genetic factors (pp.266-7).

Later surveys taken to assess Aboriginal intelligence have shown that they possess similar abilities and potential as non-Aboriginals. Noted Aboriginal write K. Walker wrote,

> *They are as alert as any other race and their thoroughness in working out a problem must not be misunderstood as a lack of intelligence. Surveys taken among Aborigines have proved that they have the same intelligence as a group as any other race and their ability to learn is no different.*
>
> (1969, p.107)

It is now believed that there is parity between the intelligence of all human races. The UNESCO Committee on race stating that, "...tests have shown essential similarity in mental characteristics amongst all human groups", (cited in Duncan, 1969, p.195).

In assessing the validity of the below average scores Aboriginals have achieved in I.Q. tests, consideration has to be made for anomalies caused by cultural factors. Most intelligence tests are culturally biased and tend to favour students whose backgrounds are similar to those of the students who were the norm for the test (LeFrancois, 1989, p.214). Questions in white-middle class referenced tests such as the Stanford-Binet and Wechsler Intelligence Scale usually concern abstract ideas and symbols and require a high degree of English language competence to be successfully answered. The questions often lack relevance to the life experiences children from minority cultures encounter. McElwain's studies show that when Aboriginals assimilate into the European culture their performances in standard intelligence tests improve. He states"...the relative average inferiority of performance on tests of the Aborigines is (roughly at least) proportional to the degree of lack of contact with European culture (i.e. language, skills, methods of thinking, and so on)" (1969, p.267). Because their life experiences are different most Aboriginals are at a disadvantage when they attempt standardised intelligence tests.

Aboriginals are also disadvantaged because I.Q. results are commonly used as an indicator of a student's level of future academic success. Statistically there is a high correlation between a student's level of academic achievement and their I.Q. (LeFrancois, 1989, p.214). As a consequence of their lower than average performances in I.Q. tests, teachers of Aboriginal students generally see them as having less academic potential.

Teachers should be cautious in assessing Aboriginal's potential on the basis of one-off intelligence tests. Conventional intelligence tests only measure the present level of a student's academic achievement and not their potential or innate cognitive capacity (LeFrancois, 1989, p.214). An individual's I.Q. is not fixed or unchanging and is highly amendable to modification by environmental interventions (Vander Zanden and Pace, 1984, p.109). Psychologist R.B. Cattell (1971, cited in Vander Zanden and Pace, 1984) maintains that we have many basic, or 'fluid' abilities, such as general reasoning, memory and attention span which are innate and not affected by

culture or experience. Cattell states however, that 'crystallized' abilities, such as general knowledge, vocabulary and language competence, are highly influenced by culture, experience and education (p.106). Norm-referenced, culturally biased tests, which customarily assess 'crystallised' intelligence, give a false indication of Aboriginal students' abilities. Any veritable assessment of Aboriginal students' intelligence and academic potential must give consideration to how Aboriginal culture and life experiences influence cognitive development and how these influences can be different to the norm.

Instead of attributing Aboriginal students' poor academic performance to low intelligence, other factors that influence their achievement must be examined. There are a number of social and psychological reasons that have been expressed to explain the general failure of education for Aboriginals. Many of the reasons relate to anthropological theories which highlight differences between traditional Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal values and practices. Aboriginal students' classroom behaviour, motivation to learn, styles of learning, and pattern of school attendance can be linked to traditional cultural influences. Also emerging are some contemporary Aboriginal community influences on school performance.

Today it is inaccurate and misleading to talk about Aboriginal students as a homogenous group who all share common and readily identifiable characteristics and who share a strong affinity to traditional beliefs and practices. The degree to which they are influenced by traditional and contemporary culture and the degree to which this will affect the students' school performances, will depend on the type of communities the students have lived in and how they identify with the values and customs of those communities. Aboriginals live in a range of homes; traditional, rural, urban, outback, country and city. Never the less, regardless of where an Aboriginal student lives it is highly likely that the student will identify with aspects of Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal Education Unit of the N.S.W. Directorate of Special Programs emphasises that,

> *Many Aboriginal children display a different outlook on life from the non-Aborigines around them, due to a different but nonetheless rich cultural heritage....Programs should be designed in schools to promote feelings of self-esteem and self-worth in Aboriginal children by fostering their cultural traits.*
>
> (1982, p.47)

An Aboriginal student's behaviour at school can be influenced by the following cultural factors. Traditionally Aboriginals are not future orientated and devote little time to planning for the future. Their concept of time is dissimilar to Europeans. Work and activities are not bound up in small divisions of time. Time is lived as days and nights and as the length of seasons. Saving is also traditionally not undertaken. The produce of hunting and gathering is shared amongst kin and is rarely stored. Another factor is competition amongst individuals. Survival depends upon the welfare of the whole tribe. Individual members of a tribe are disposed to group goals and co-operate rather than compete. Additionally, work is part of on-going life, characterised by the necessities and eventualities of hunter-gathering. Work is not confined to a routine portion of the day. The final factor is the acquisition of knowledge. Aboriginals learn survival skills through imitation and observation and then through trial and error. Knowledge of custom and ceremony is learnt through story telling and performance. Governing life are 'Dreamtime' laws and customs which are unquestioned (Gallacher, 1969, pp.100-1).

An analysis of these traditional cultural influences shows the obvious disparity between the values of our schools and the values an Aboriginal child may possess. What chance does the culturally different child have in a school that demands competition amongst individuals, that doesn't always allow the sharing of knowledge, that promotes the questioning of the way things are, that encourages rigid adherence to routine work and attendance and which teaches abstract concepts which have little relevance to the Aboriginal child's life experiences? It is unlikely that the Aboriginal

child would have any motivation to attend let alone strive to achieve.

The disparity between the values of schools and Aboriginal students is also the basis of a contemporary theory for a lack of school achievement by Aboriginals, expressed by R. Folds (1987). Folds claims that Aboriginal children's classroom behaviour and ultimate failure in school cannot be explained simply in terms of cultural differeneces. Aboriginal children are purported to choose to reject school. Their failure can be viewed as an act of political resistance against schools which are seen as assimilatory agencies. Acts of resistance include absenteeism, failure to comply to demands, disrupting classes and a reluctance or refusal to complete work (Folds, 1987, pp.1-20). Folds' resistance perspective highlights the need to examine how and what is presented to Aboriginals in schools.

Probably the most extensive and enlightening study of the social and psychological reasons effecting Aboriginal school performance was conducted by Professor B. Watts (1981, cited in Muir, 1984, pp.30-52) and Muir 1983, pp.19-27). Watts developed three groupings of factors which she felt determined the Aboriginal child's level of school success, and which helped to explain the historical failure of education for Aboriginals. The three groupings, the children's characteristics, the learning situation (school, class), and the environments beyond the school, were also seen as interdependent variables (Muir, 1984, p.31). Each of Watts' groupings yield numerous indicators of discord between Aboriginal students and their schools.

Aboriginal children often don't succeed at school because their social and emotional well-being is under threat.

> *The child functions in the classroom as a total person, bringing with him all the results of his previous learnings and experiences which have shaped his emotional, physical and intellectual being: his self-identification and his influential friends, his concept of himself and his level of adjustment, his motives, values and aspirations, his*

> *attitudes to and perceptions of school, learning and the world about him, his health and nutritional status and his sensory functioning, his level of cognitive functioning, his preferred ways of knowing and learning and his competence in language usage.*
>
> (Watts, 1983, p.20)

Schools that give little or no recognition to Aboriginal culture and to preferred ways of learning are likely to be seen as irrelevant, alien and threatening to Aboriginal children. Emotionally the children could feel insecure and unmotivated. Motivation is an important factor in school success.

> *Unless a child's motives are aroused his intelligence lies fallow; the full utilisation of his abilities demands that he sees a purpose in their use. In turn, intelligence grows as it is used. The unmotivated pupil learns poorly, leading often to a false judgement by the teacher that he lacks ability.*
>
> (Watts, 1983, p.23)

The type of learning situation Aboriginal students encounter depends upon the type of schools they attend and the teachers they interact with. Schools need to examine their curriculums to see if they are receptive to the needs of Aboriginal people. Curriculums will only facilitate learning if they are culturally appropriate in content and method. It is the view of Aboriginal people that the education presented to them is still inappropriate. Schools must develop,"...an educational theory and pedagogy that takes into account Aboriginal epistemology" (National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1985, p.4). The role of teachers is also critical in determining the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. The teacher's values and attitudes, knowledge of Aboriginality, pedagogical style and competence, and expectations of Aboriginal students, will all influence the classroom learning situation. Often Aboriginal students are taught by inexperienced, uninformed and sometimes hostile, non-Aboriginal teachers. "It is difficult for

teachers to foster the learning of children whom they do not understand...."(ibid, p.35).

The third influencing factor, the environments beyond the school, includes the Aboriginal community and the individual students' homes. Aboriginals are the poorest identifiable sector of the Australian community (Directorate of Special Programs, 1982, p.49), and suffer accompanying problems of poor housing, poor health, inadequate food and clothing, and stress. Many Aboriginal homes are educationally impoverished and lack reading, writing and reference materials. Aboriginal parents are likely to have had unfavourable experiences when they attended school and may not have the skills, knowledge or willingness to assist in their children's education. There is a high percentage of unemployment amongst Aboriginal people. With no money and an impoverished future, many Aboriginal people feel powerless and suffer poor physical and mental health. The Aboriginal child, loyal to their family and community, could easily be led to believe that this is Aboriginal man's place in society and that education will not change his or her destiny.

Historically education programs and policies have done little to address the lack of equality of opportunity and outcomes for Aboriginals in schools. Predominantly Aboriginals have been expected to modify their behaviour, values and skills and become acceptable to white society. In the late 1960's an attempt was made to address the failure of assimilatory education by introducing deficit and compensatory programs. It is clear that the problem in Aboriginal education was perceived as being Aboriginals themselves and not the type of instruction they were receiving. As McConnochie (1982) writes, "Indeed the phrase "the Aboriginal problem" locates the source of the difficulty in the Aboriginal group. To the extent that the Aboriginal group differs from the mainstream white society it is considered to be deficient" (p.27). McConnochie adds that solutions to Aboriginal education problems have orientated towards changing the child through remedial, compensatory and enrichment programs (p.28). These types of programs not only fail to view the school as the likely source of problems but they also fail to recognise and use the abilities of Aboriginal children.

Aboriginal children possess many skills and knowledge which are devalued in our education system. Noted Aboriginal writer M. Valadian (1985) claims that recent school programs have not been based on utilising the talents and giftedness of Aboriginals. She suggests that the range of knowledge and skills that children had to acquire in a traditional community by the age of four or five alludes to giftedness and talent constituting the norm amongst the children. Valadian supports her claim by comparing the multitude of skills the children had acquired at an early age compared to the skills of non-Aboriginals of the same age. The abilities the children acquired are quite extensive and certainly refute suggestions that Aboriginal children are less intelligent and capable as non-Aboriginals. The list includes:

- a wide range of practical skills;
- a high sense of mathematical ability based on a knowledge of kinship;
- a sense or precision;
- a wide range of subject learning areas - nature studies, survival skills, the ability to entertain themselves in a safe and relatively mature manner;
- a knowledge of songs, dance and drama;
- basic cooking skills;
- elementary homecrafts such as weaving;
- a knowledge of weaponry and of ceremonial life;
- the ability to memorise a wide range of relationships;
- a knowledge of natural elements and their relationship to food supplies (what food was available at certain times of the year);
- personal safety.

(Valadian, 1985, p.37)

Although not all children develop traditional skills now, Valadian adds,"...there should be a recognition of inherent talent in Aboriginal children as the basis for educational programs in traditional, urban, and rural schools" (p.38).

Author E.J. Braggett (1985) expresses the opinion that in Australia the prevailing attitude on giftedness is that it pertains to academic achievement. He feels that many talents possessed by children from cultures other than

the while monoculture are often not in accord with schools' definitions of talent and may not be noticed. Aboriginal children have many talents which he thinks are not given recognition. Aboriginal children have high memory skills, excel in visual-spatial ability, are persistent, and exhibit high internal motivation when interested. Teachers may also fail to develop the potential talent Aboriginal children may possess in popular music, special forms of dance, group skills, art, performing skills, social leadership, humour and witty language. Throughout Australia excellence can be seen in the tracking skills of children from the north of South Australia, in the social and co-operative skills of Islander students, and in the photographic skills and athletic qualities of urban Aboriginal children (Braggett, 1985, pp.3-4).

There is a need in Australia to rethink the premise that Aboriginals are failing in our schools. Our schools are a failure for Aboriginals. Aboriginal students are as intelligent and as capable as their peers yet we do not allow them to enjoy comparative success. We have to discontinue current educational practices that fail to meet the individual Aboriginal child's cognitive, social and physical needs and embark on a program of truly multicultural instruction which both recognises and actively utilises the Aboriginal child's skills and knowledge. Aboriginal parents must be encouraged to bring to schools their wealth of ideas, their feelings and values so as to enrich our schools and help them to see a purpose in what our schools offer. As a society we need to value our Aboriginal culture and assist in providing not only educational parity, but equality of, employment opportunity, political representation and social recognition. Australia's banner as the "Clever Country" has not yet been earned and we will not develop as a nation to our fullest social and economic potential whilst we devalue and ignore the enormous richness of our indigenous people.

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